DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 353 104 RC 018 912

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TITLE She Likes Me.
INSTITUTION Kansas State Univ., Manhattan. Center for Rural Education and Small Schools.
PUB DATE Oct 91
NOTE 6p.; In: The Rural Way: Traditions and Innovations. Proceedings of the Annual Rural and Small Schools Conference (13th, Manhattan, KS, October 10-13, 1991); see RC 018 911.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Declining Enrollment; Economic Impact; *Educational Administration; *Educational Cooperation; Educational Legislation; Educational Opportunities; Elementary Secondary Education; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; *School District Reorganization; *School Districts
IDENTIFIERS *North Dakota; *School District Consortium ND

ABSTRACT

This report describes the North Dakota School District Boundary Restructuring Program that was adopted by the 1989 North Dakota legislature in an effort to offset declining population and school enrollment in rural areas. The program provides incentive money for clusters of school districts to join together to enhance educational opportunities for students and to make better use of limited educational and administrative services. At present the program includes 19 clusters of school districts called consortiums across the state. A total of 107 of 268 North Dakota school districts are involved in the program. Seventeen of the 19 consortiums have received planning grants from the state, and 12 of these consortiums are implementing approved cooperative educational plans. Seven additional consortiums are developing plans to be implemented in September of 1993. The School District Boundary Restructuring Program has succeeded in bringing together units large enough to gain significant cost efficiency and to provide comprehensive educational programs. The cooperation and sharing of resources under this program is timely for four reasons: (1) to help smaller schools to meet new school accreditation requirements; (2) to help ease fiscal restraints of rural school districts; (3) to allow North Dakota to take advantage of technological advances that would be too costly for single school budgets; and (4) to help school districts manage the change resulting from declining population. This program encourages full participation of communities and local educational leaders in improving educational opportunities for rural students. (LP)

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She Likes Me

Presenter:
Wayne Sanstead, Superintendent
North Dakota Department of Public Instruction

North Dakota and I suspect many other midwest states are changing in ways that are having a dramatic effect on education, especially rural education. The most noticeable and for education, the most consequential changes have to do with the declining rural population and subsequent decline in school enrollments.

Rural schools in North Dakota are cutting programs and staff to remain fiscally solvent. The Demographic changes in rural North Dakota are so dramatic that if we do not respond quickly and effectively, many rural schools will be forced to close without having had an opportunity to consider better options such as clustering, distance learning, etc.

In the 107 districts currently involved in our restructuring effort the 0-5 population has declined by 33% between 1983 and 1991. The biggest decline over that period are in the most rural areas where enrollments have already reached the point where program cuts have already reduced course offerings to the basics. Across North Dakota there has been a 30% decline in the number of women in the prime child-bearing age between 1980 and 1990 and the birth rate has dropped from 83 per thousand to 66. The final complication for rural districts is that growing numbers of young families are leaving rural areas so that the number of women in the child bearing age group is falling at a significantly faster rate than elsewhere in North Dakota.

In a period when our schools should be considering for reaching changes in educational service delivery to meet increased demands from the business world and higher education institutions, many of our rural schools are in a struggle to survive.

We need visionary leadership and particularly effective managers to see the crises we face as an opportunity. Theodore Levitt of the Harvard Business school sums up the need for effective managers. "More than ever before, managerial effectiveness requires inspiration and shrewdness, fast decisions and firm decisiveness, courage linked to conviction, and, above all, the will to act. Increasingly it is more important to act fast than to think correctly about tomorrow, because what one must act on is what is already in the process of happening, not what might happen later. In the age of fast history, equivocation is more harmful that prediction is helpful. So... things are a little different than when God told Noah to build an ark so that he, his family, and all the species of the earth could survive the flood he'd let loose in two weeks. Shocked, Noah said, 'Two weeks? God, do you know how long it takes to build an ark?' And

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God replied, 'Noah, how long can you tread water?' It got done in two weeks."

The '89 North Dakota Legislature understood this need. They adopted the School District Boundary Restructuring Program. The program has solved from a pilot project to a main stream educational effort. The program provides incentive money for clusters of school districts to join together to enhance educational opportunities for students and to make better use of limited educational and administrative services. The legislation provides up to $165.00 per ADM for up to 3 years as an incentive for clusters of rural districts to cooperate. The clusters must include at least three K-12 districts with a total enrollment of 600 and a land area of at least 700 square miles. The consortium applies for a planning grant, then develops a cooperative educational plan for the unit. After 3 consecutive 1-year cooperative plans, voters in the consortium are asked to decide if they want to consolidate into one unit. The program is a voluntary local option plan. However, participation in this program has exceeded all expectations. The program has been received with a great deal of enthusiasm by community leaders, parents, legislators and educators. It is probably the most significant development in North Dakota education in recent memory. At present the program includes nineteen clusters of school districts called consortiums across the state. A total of 107 of 268 North Dakota school districts are involved. Of North Dakota's 117,000 public school students, approximately 60,000 attend school in North Dakota's twelve largest school districts. Forty percent of these 268 rural and 40% of the states rural enrollment are now involved in the restructuring program. I believe the program's combination of incentives and assistance from the state level, coupled with local control of program choices, makes the School District Boundary Restructuring Program the right program in the right place at the right time.

Let me review 3 aspects of the program with you. First, what have been the accomplishments since 1989. Second, how has the State of North Dakota benefitted; and, third we'll look at the future and how we intend to continue the success of this restructuring program.

First, what has really happened in the two years since the passage of the restructuring program seventeen consortiums have received planning grants, and twelve of these consortiums are already implementing approved cooperative educational plans. Each of the twelve had identified a program coordinator who is specifically responsible for implementing these programs. Each consortium will undergo a mid-year program assessment in December of January. A total of seven additional consortiums are developing plans that they hope to implement in September of 1993. One additional consortium is on a waiting list for future funding.

The School District Boundary Restructuring Program has succeeded in bringing together units large enough to gain significant cost efficiency and to provide comprehensive educational programs. Incentive funding provided by the

program is significant enough to draw units together which meet the program criteria. The program provides an effective structure through which consortiums can evaluate educational programs and implement needed changes. Without this program as a vehicle, districts would be faces not only with making the needed changes but also with developing a method through which they could undertake these changes and provide funding. That kind of combination would be overwhelming.

In the recent history of cooperation/consolidation in North Dakota, two small school districts, neither of which could survive alone, cooperated or merged. The result was a unit too small to provide comprehensive services or achieve maximum cost effectiveness and one which in ten years or less, sad to say, would likely face merger again. Obviously this process did not provide comprehensive student programs and services for the long term.

The adoption of the School District Boundary Restructuring Program is bringing many benefits to education in North Dakota. It has provided the process and incentives to encourage school districts to participate in practical but visionary plans which allows clusters of districts to develop a product which is uniquely theirs and one that responds to the educational needs of their communities. I am convinced that North Dakota needs this plan now as never before. The comprehensive cooperation and sharing of resources that is beginning to take place under the School District Boundary Restructuring Program is timely for four major reasons:

The Department has adopted school accreditation requirements which will become effective over the next several years. Smaller schools will experience increasing difficulty in meeting these requirements alone.

School districts find themselves under extremely tight fiscal constraints. The tax referrals of December 1990, declining taxable valuations, and declining enrollments in most of our rural areas have forced many schools to cut programs to the bare minimum.

Restructuring allows North Dakota to take advantage of technological advancements which would be too costly for single school budgets. Interactive television, computer networks and computerized library systems are designed for usage by multi-district units.

Enrollments in virtually all of rural North Dakota are declining--in some cases, declining sharply. Enrollments in seventeen of the nineteen consortium areas declined up to 28% between 1980 and 1989. For example:

- Seven districts of the Lonetree Interdistrict Consortium in the Harvey-Fessenden area had a total enrollment of 1,935 students in 1980. By 1989-90, their enrollment dropped to 1,396 or a drop of 539 students in nine years.

- Seven districts in the Minot area had 1,945 students in 1980. Nine years later they showed a loss of 378 when their total enrollment was 1,567. Anticipated enrollment by 1995-96 will decline further to about 1300 students.

- Ten districts in the Enderlin-Lisbon-Oakes area currently have 2,835 students. Their projected enrollment by 96-97 is a drop of 471 students. Our student population is definitely declining.

Where are these declines? The most dramatic declines among school age students are in the kindergarten through third grade group. In the Rural Cass Consortium there are presently 559 students in kindergarten through third grade. It is estimated that by 96-97 there will be only 377 or a drop of approximately 200 students. Other examples include the ten districts of the Southeast Consortium which will decline by approximately 200 students, and the seven districts of the North Central Consortium, currently at 461 and projected to decline by about 150 students by 1994-95.

All of these figures lead to one conclusion. The educational population in North Dakota is definitely changing. The recently released Centennial Rural Life poll indicates that rural North Dakota residents hold a pessimistic view about population trends for their areas. Over 80 percent of North Dakota residents agree or strongly agree that rural North Dakota will continue to lose population. The School District Boundary Restructuring Program is essential to deal with the dramatic changes which are taking place in much of North Dakota. If we are to effectively manage the change, it is essential that we continue the consortium-building process.

As we look toward the future of restructuring, we must continue to focus our attention on the one overriding issue-what can this program provide for our kids? We know that this program is already achieving the primary objective of providing increased educational opportunities for students. For example, Paul Thomas, a junior at Karlsruhe High School, is able to get guidance services, Spanish and Art through consortium-based programs developed by the North Central Consortium. In the Midkota Consortium, Guy Klein, a high school student from Grace City, is able to take physics through a consortium-based program. Stephanie Bolken, a student at Tolna High School, is taking Spanish and receiving vocational guidance services through the Greater Nelson County Consortium. In the Tri-District Consortium, Kim Ihry of Hope is able to take a foreign language and receive guidance service provided through the consortium. There are many examples among the hundreds of North Dakota students who

are now receiving expanded educational opportunity through consortium activity.

I am continually impressed at the degree to which consortiums have been able to focus on the critical issue of student need. There is no question that the program, as it is designed, places a very tough and demanding decision making process in the hands of local educational leaders. We are strongly encouraged by what we have seen to date, but the jury is still out about whether decisions can be made wisely in what is frequently a highly emotionally-charged environment. School districts which have begun to develop and implement cooperative plans clearly have taken significant risks. It is extremely important that we at the state level, both in the Department of Public Instruction and in the Legislature, continue to support local educational leaders and reward them for taking these risks to bring about better educational opportunities for their students.

In summary, we have made many accomplishments in school district restructuring since 1989. Together we have before us the challenge of building on the success and vision that this program offers to assure that our educational system will prepare the students of North Dakota for the 21st Century. Now we need to look into the future to see how we can continue the success of the North Dakota School District Boundary Restructuring Program.

I believe if we look back on this opportunity seven to fifteen years from now and come to the conclusion that what came out of this effort was merely bigger districts, we will have failed. This program provides a rare opportunity to bring about change. To envision success as merely creating larger districts would be a failure of leadership. We have to aim for more and expect much much more. One can argue persuasively that this may be the only opportunity that current educators will have in their professional careers to make a significant difference in the way we deliver educational services. It may be the only opportunity to open up the process, not just tinker, but rework, rethink, our educational delivery system in a way that allows full participation of our communities and a way that insures an outcome that we can live with and work with effectively for the next generation.